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ABSTRACT

In an effort to discover the effects of mass media on viewer perception of candidates' positions, tests were administered to 10 to 12 families at each of five locations across the country immediately following each of the 1976 Carter-Ford debates. Sixteen statements were drawn from the presidential platform of each party and each statement was evaluated by the respondent as self, as Carter, and as Ford on standard five-point agree/disagree scales. The following conclusions were made: (1) the notion that voters move their positions toward the position of the candidate of their choice and that presidential campaigns induce a substantial part of the voters to switch candidates was not supported; (2) for most voters, the fall presidential campaigns served a maintenance or reinforcing function for previously made decisions; (3) the same campaign can serve both to reduce and to increase perceived polarity between candidates; and (4) families showing independent choices among the members are rare. In general, the family provided a firm reference for voting behavior and apparently was more forceful in influencing family members to change their preference than were the televised debates. (Three illustrative tables and a sample questionnaire are included.) (JF)

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AN ANALYSIS OF CHANGES IN VOTER PERCEPTION OF CANDIDATES' POSITIONS

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Introduction

Researchers in the broad field which has been crudely labeled "political communication" provide a wide variety of tentative hypotheses and conclusions regarding the impact of media on political preferences and voting behavior. Virtually all of the empirical political socialization literature contains direct or indirect reference to media variables within various levels of social complexity. Ever since the "classic" studies of the forties, summary volumes such as The People's Choice, Voting, The Voter Decides and American Voting Behavior have reinforced the contention that media play an active role in the political socialization process. More recent collections of political communication research such as those by Chaffee (1975) and Kraus and Davis (1976) suggest that contemporary researchers frequently accept the assertions of these benchmark studies without engaging in further empirical verification which would help clarify the relationship between mass communication and political socialization.

One of the most popular conceptualizations which has been used to guide the past decade's political communication research was first advanced by Klapper (1960) and refined by Kraus (1964). According to these writers, the effect of the media is "phonomenistic." That is, exposure to media content takes place among other factors, both behavioral and social, which also serve as mediating influences. Writing about the impact of the 1960 "Great Debates," Lang and Lang (1961) observed, "To disentangle the influence of any single campaign

event or issue on the outcome of an election is always difficult. In the case of the TV debates, it becomes a logical absurdity . . ." (p. 277). Rather than grant candidate exposure via televised debates any single, direct influence, Lang and Lang reasoned that the impact of televised debates need to be analyzed against a backdrop of the well-established functions served by the mass media. As stated by the authors, "They function primarily in two ways: (1) to increase [illegible]alience of party alignments and (2) to adjust and bring images [illegible]e men, issues, etc., into line with voting preferences." The televised debates are somewhat unique, however, in that they provide the viewer with exposure to the two candidates simultaneously. Hence, the viewer is forced to make instantaneous comparisons and contrasts between the candidates' positions on important issues, as opposed to permitting the limitation of one's exposure solely to the candidate of choice. Though Kraus and Smith (1962) found that the issues in the 1960 debates were closely linked to the perceived images of the candidates themselves, these and similar studies offer support for the position of Lang and Lang that presidential debates serve to bring the voters' conception of the image of the candidate and the issues close to the viewer's original voting preference. (Kraus and Davis, 1976, p. 59.)

Subscribing to the notion that the impact of the media is phenomenistic, our interest in studying the 1976 Carter-Ford debates was based upon the belief that the series of debates afforded appropriate events within the campaign period which enabled us to look at changes in voter percep-

tions of candidates' positions over time. The debates themselves were but a single element in the total political milieu which existed prior to the 1976 election.

Combining the findings of political communication researchers interested in measuring media effects with the results of political scientists engaged in inquiries which consider the impact of peer groups, education, socioeconomic factors and family values, permits the generation of conflicting sets of hypotheses. Since these "models" of political socialization fail to lead the researcher to the same definitive conclusions, the various hypotheses need to be addressed, and subsequently accepted or rejected on the basis of the resulting evidence.

To date there has been little evidence to shake the firmly held contention that the family unit holds a central position in the process of political socialization. While it is nearly impossible to determine at what point family influences intersect with other influences in the voters' environment, it appears logical to assume that "family" as a grossly defined variable forms the nucleus of all socializing agents. Blumenfeld (1964) and Wasby (1966) have suggested that the primary role played by the family in the area of political socialization is the transmission of political preference (party affiliation). So strong is this influence in some cases that media exposure has no measurable effect. In other instances, individuals are apt to selectively attend to those appearances and statements which reinforce the primary affiliation.

With the recent decline in direct party identification, some recent studies have pointed to an increased emphasis on campaign issues and candidates' images. Parents transmit their political preferences to their children on the basis of issues and images in the same way that they project simple party affiliation. Whether the voter is actually in agreement with the position of the candidate appears to be of minor importance. Of much greater significance is that the voter perceives the existence of such agreement (Sherrod, 1971; Mendelsohn and O'Keefe, 1975).

Regarding changes in perception of candidates, O'Keefe and Mendelsohn (1974), interviewing voters in Summit County, Ohio, found that only ten percent of their respondents claimed to have learned something after deciding upon a candidate that reinforced their initial decision. Conversely, only three percent stated that they had learned something new which made them uncertain that they had selected the best candidate. Although these findings tend to provide additional support for the popular reinforcement hypothesis, it can be argued that the voters did, in fact, acquire new information of which they were unaware. Earlier results from a 1972 Summit County study revealed that more than 20 percent of the voters sampled claimed to have been influenced by various events which occurred during the campaign, although a sizable segment of the voters appeared to interpret influence in terms of rationalizations for previous decisions.

Suggesting that actual voting behavior or candidate switching is an oversimplified criterion of change, O'Keefe (1975) has called for

research efforts which delineate the net effects of combined campaign influences upon voter decision-making: "Degree of reported influence also needs to be empirically associated with changes in respondents' positions on issues, perceptions of candidates' positions on issues, and perceptions of candidates' images. This should ideally be conducted by measuring perceived influence, issue and image change, and communication behavior at a minimum of three points in time with use of appropriate causal modeling techniques." (p. 140.)

Rationale and Hypotheses

Following the recommendations of O'Keefe, the present study permits the investigation of patterns of change in the perceived position of self and each of the two major candidates, by individuals within a family unit. It is, therefore, possible to investigate (1) what patterns appear within the entire subject group, and (2) whether patterns exhibited by individuals within family groups are similar, directed toward congruence, or independent.

With regard to the first question, a number of change patterns have been postulated, either directly or inferred, to describe the possible functions of a campaign. Drawing from the literature of political communication at least five hypetheses can be generated to predict changes in voter perception of candidates' positions:

1. Perceptual Stability or Maintenance -- Absence of Shift. Consistent with the widely held view that the mass media and other campaign influences serve merely to reinforce existing perceptions, if they have

any impact at all, one could predict that the campaign would be insufficient to result in a measurable change. Even though O'Keefe has suggested that instrumentation such as that designed for this study should prove to be more sensitive to perceptual shifts within the pre-election period, there is some existing evidence that these changes simply do not take place. If the perceptions of voters remain stable throughout the campaign, we would expect their responses to reveal anchorage of self and the relative position of candidate of choice and opposing candidate. Change in perception of one candidate should therefore be coupled with a similar change in the other. (See Figure 1.)

2. Alignment with Candidate. Just as there is evidence to suggest no movement, one could predict that as the campaign develops, the voter becomes increasingly aware of the issues and adopts the position of the candidate of choice. If this pattern operates, one would expect the change to occur on the self position (voter), with either constant values or parallels change for the candidate of choice. (See Figure 2.)

3. Contrast and Assimilation. What might be described as a "classic" hypothesis would argue that the self position should remain anchored throughout the campaign period, while the candidate of choice is moved closer to the position of the voter. The opposing candidate's positions are perceived as becoming increasingly distant over time. In other words, the voter undergoes a shift in his/her perception of both candidate's positions, moving the candidate of choice closer to one's own

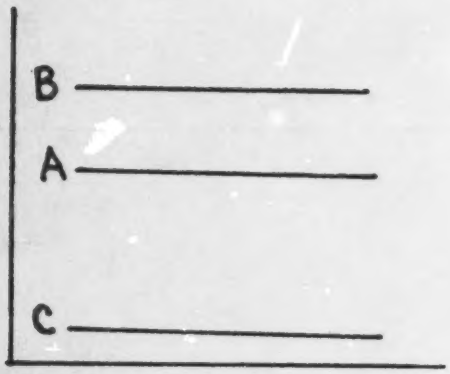

Figure 1

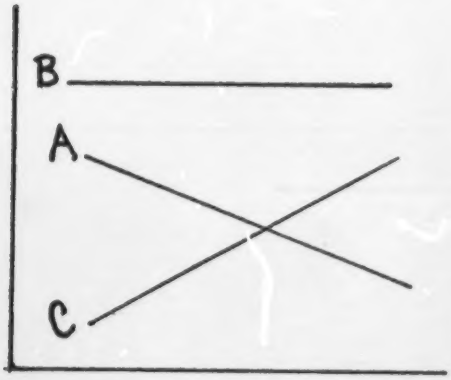

Figure 2

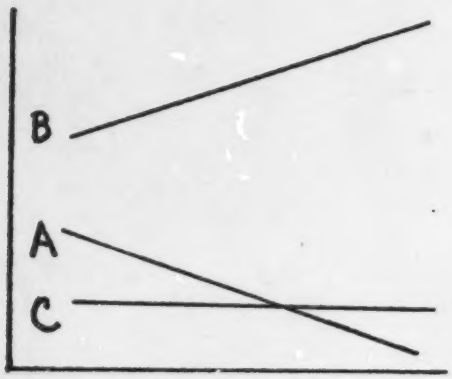

Figure 3

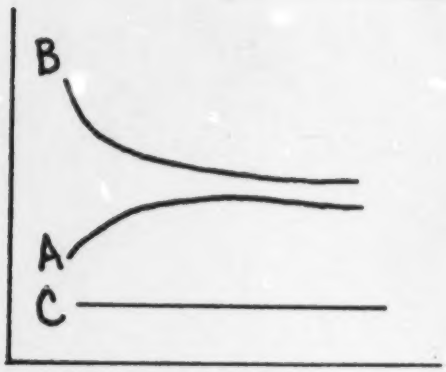

Figure 4

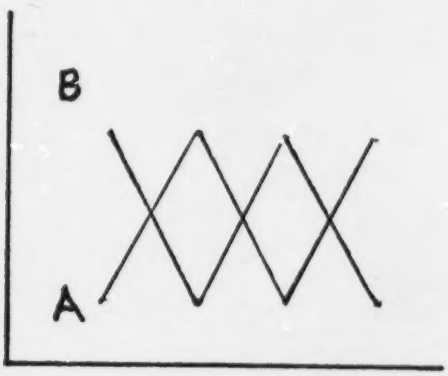

Figure 5

KEY: In all figures A is the difference between the perceived position of the candidate of choice and the self position; B is the difference between the perceived position of the opposing candidate and the self position; and C is change in the individual's position over time.

as the campaign progresses, while moving the opposing candidate farther away. (See Figure 3.)

4. Double Exposure. Lang and Lang (1961) have argued that the campaign (especially the debates) serves to expose the voter to both candidates. Further, it can be argued that the nature of American presidential campaigns tend to reduce the differences between the candidates. One would therefore expect a pattern in support of this hypothesis to show candidates converging, but the self position would remain relatively stable.

5. Selling of the President. The "selling" or "merchandising" hypothesis would predict the existence of an anchored perception for self, but with different candidates holding the assimilated position (closer proximity to self) over time. This interpretation, presented graphically in Figure 5, assumes that no single candidate can maintain a consistently persuasive campaign. In the case of a consistent advantage, one would expect the voter to remain anchored and the continuous assimilation of a single candidate. If there is concomitant rejection of the unsuccessful candidate, the pattern mimics the contrast and assimilation pattern.

Regarding the second question, we have suggested three possible intra-familial patterns: congruent, convergent and independent. The congruent pattern argues for the traditional notion of strong family influence on voting behavior. Initial position will be similar and change should it occur will be parallel. The convergent pattern would also support strong family influence but would suggest the operation of increasing salience of "family values." Initial positions would be independent and change by

individuals would be directed toward a common position. The third pattern would argue against family influence (at least of a positive sort). Initial family position would not be predictive of final position nor would the family share a common position at the close of the campaign.

It was not expected that a single individual familial hypothesis would be found to fully or even substantially accommodate the data. It was, however, expected that each of these patterns and perhaps others not hypothesized would appear.

Procedures

In order to test these hypotheses, sixteen statements were drawn from the presidential platforms of the Republican and Democratic parties. The statements selected were those which exhibited the greatest disagreement between the two parties, or highly pronounced identification with one of the parties. Each statement was evaluated by the respondent as self, as Jimmy Carter and as Gerald Ford on separate, standard, five-point, agree/disagree scales. These statements were included in an extensive questionnaire which was used with a panel sample of families drawn from five locations. A family was defined as two or more persons 16 years or older living in the same residence and related by marriage or blood. All members of the family who were 16 years or older responded to the questionnaire. The five locations were Athens, Ohio; Austin, Texas, East Lansing, Michigan; Hartford, Connecticut; and Salt Lake City, Utah. The locations were those of the contributors to this paper.

Families were randomly selected at each location, informed of the panel task, and asked to participate. This process was continued until 10 to 12 families per location had volunteered to complete the entire task. Panel families completed the questionnaire four times. The pre-test was given during the week of September 21, 1976; the remaining three tests were administered in turn, following each of the televised debates. In general, the questionnaires were hand-delivered prior to each debate and retrieved following a few days time to permit completion by each family member. Each respondent had his/her own personal copy of each questionnaire. No attempt, then, was made to limit interpersonal or other media influences which followed the debates. Respondents did, however, document sources of influence concerning their judgment of the debates.

Four distinct criterion measures were constructed from these data and are described as follows:

D_1 was the average absolute difference between the individual's position (X_1) and the perceived position of the candidate of choice (X_{cc}) which is given by:

$$D_1 = \sum_{i=1}^{N} \left| \frac{X_{Ii} - X_{cci}}{N} \right|$$

Where N is the number of non-zero pairs.

D_2 was the average absolute difference between the individual's position and the perceived position of the opposing candidate (X_{oc}). Or:

$$D_2 = \sum_{i=1}^{N} \left| \frac{X_{1i} - X_{oci}}{N} \right|$$

D_3 was the average absolute difference between the candidate of choice and the opposing candidate. Or:

$$D_3 = \sum_{i=1}^{N} \left| \frac{X_{cci} - X_{oci}}{N} \right|$$

Candidate of choice and opposing candidate were determined by response to a forced-choice item in the questionnaire requiring the respondent to select either Ford or Carter as their candidate. In a few cases where the choice was not made, candidate of choice was assigned to the candidate showing less distance.

D_4 was the average absolute difference between the individual's position on the pre-test and his/her position on the subsequent post administrations. Or:

$$D_4 = \sum_{i=1}^{N} \frac{X_{11i} - X_{12i}}{N}$$

For the first post-test. In subsequent tests, the minuend remained the same but the sutrahend was taken from the particular post test at hand.

D_4 was also calculated for the pre-test data alone by taking the average absolute difference between the actual response and the extreme response (1 or 5). This score can be considered a "potential change"

score, assuming that respondents selecting extreme values show less potential for change. The pre-test D_4 use was limited to provide an anchor point in subsequent graphs.

Results and Discussion

Patterns of Change

In order to test for patterns of change among the criterion measures, the difference between the pre-debate values for each of the D_1, D_2, and D_3 measures, and the corresponding values in the last post-debate questionnaire was tested for direction. Individuals were sorted on the basis of the various difference patterns which emerged, e.g., $D_{11} < D_{14}$, $D_{21} < D_{24}$, $D_{31} < D_{34}$, later referred to as GGG.[1] The rationale for this sort included the following:

1) The hypothesized patterns (excluding the merchandizing pattern) established requirements as to the existing relationship between pre and post values.

2) The merchandizing hypothesis could be dealt with by direct analyses of the respondents who exhibited a change for their candidate of choice.

3) The sort, while establishing restriction on the last debate value (greater or lesser) within a set, in no way limited the other values in that set. Consequently, it was considered a legitimate procedure to (a) conduct the sort, and (b) to determine if the entire data set fit the pattern predicted.

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[1] The condition of equality occurred in five cases. These cases were distributed into retained patterns (see below) if they would fit with one and only one change. Three cases were reclaimed in this manner.

Merchandizing Pattern

Prior to the sort, the data were examined for support for the merchandizing pattern. Only six individuals were found who recorded a switch from one candidate to another. No voter switched more than once, and all voters who switched did so in the direction of the other members of their family. It appeared obvious that voter preference switches could better be explained by intrafamilial influences rather than media hype. Since there was no observable support for the merchandizing hypothesis the six respondents were returned to the subject pool for the sort test.

From the sort, five attributable categories (LLL, GGG, GLL, LLG, LGG) emerged. These accounted for 89 percent of all respondents.[2] These categories appear to provide support for three patterns of perceptual shift: Maintenance, Exposure and Assimilation/Contrast.

Maintenance. The sort categories LLL and GGG fit the requirements of the maintenance pattern. That is, the direction of change in the perceived difference between the self position and the candidate of choice, and the self position and the opposing candidate was the same. The individual position remained relatively stable. In the LLL category, both candidates converged on the individual's self position with the opposing

[2]The remaining ten respondents showed unique or low frequency patterns (e.g. LGL) or had ambiguous equality occurances.

candidate who begins at a greater distance moving slightly more rapidly than the candidate of choice. In the GGG category, both candidates move away from the individual's self position, but the candidate of choice moves more slowly. These patterns are clearly reflected in Figures 6a and 6b.

The figures graphically represent the mean scores for D_1, D_2, D_3 and D_4 over the four administrations for the GGG and LLL subjects respectively.[3] (The actual mean scores are presented in Table I.) The graphs reveal that the individual remains anchored over time but shifts the perception of the two candidates in common direction, though to differing degrees.

In considering the differences between the two maintenance patterns, it is likely that an LLL respondent would express fewer reservations about the opposing candidate while maintaining the favored position of the candidate of choice. The GGG respondent on the other hand would express greater reservations about the candidate of choice while maintaining a much greater distance for the opposing candidate.

The maintenance pattern accounted for 36 percent of the qualifying respondents.

Exposure. The GLL and LLG sort categories met the expected values for the exposure pattern. It was expected that in this pattern an increased exposure would tend to decrease the perceived polarization of

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[3]The reader is reminded that D_{41} is an anchor score and not a change score. D_4 in administrations 2, 3 and 4 represents the amount of change from the pre-test.

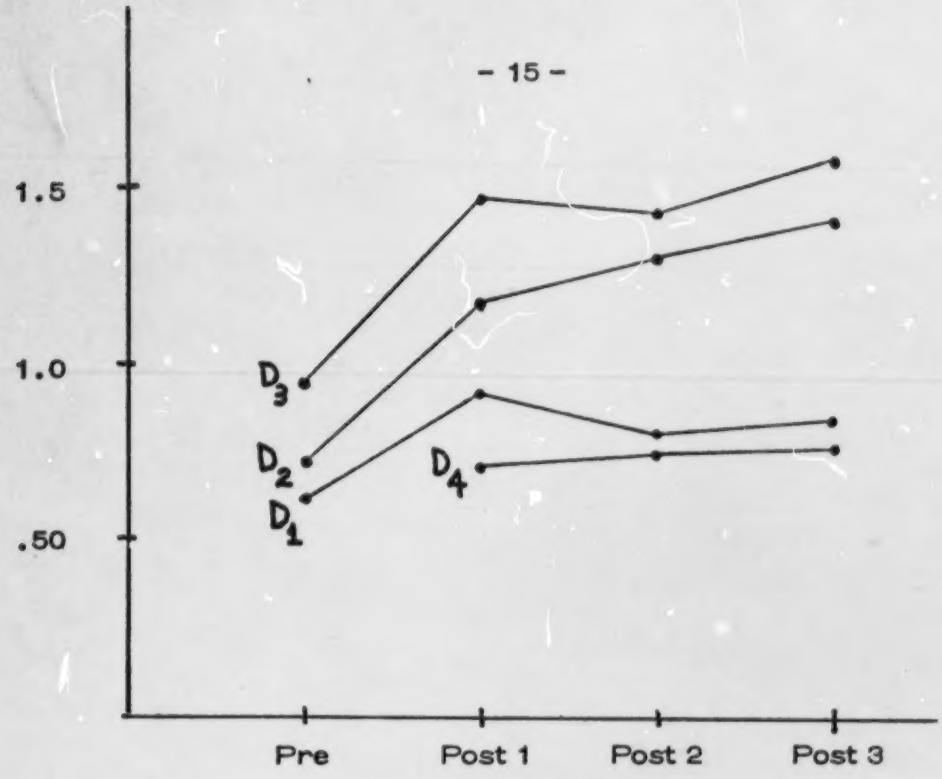

Figure 6 a) Maintenance — Candidate Divergent

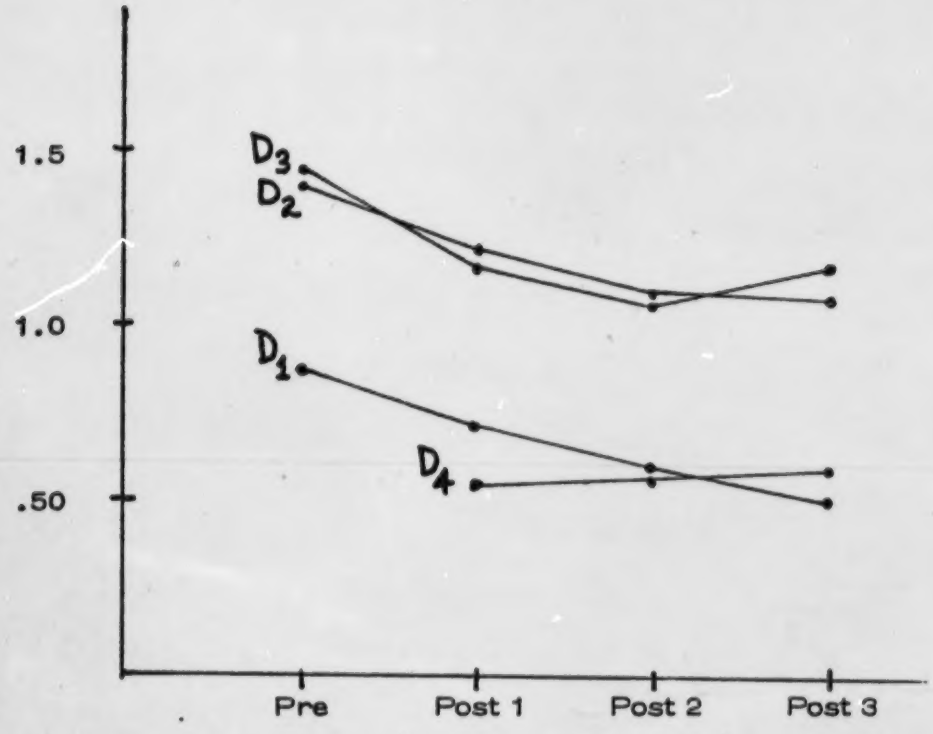

Figure 6 b) Maintenance — Candidate Convergent

the two candidates. There are two change sequences which provide this effect: the candidate of choice and the opposing candidate can move toward each other, or the candidate of choice and the opposing candidate can move toward a common referent. The GLL sort category suggests the former and the LLG category the latter, with an indication that the candidates move toward the common referent at different speeds. Figures 7a and 7b provide the graphic representation of the mean scores (see Table II for the numerical values) for D_1, D_2, D_3, and D_4 over the four test administrations. The GLL sort graph (7a) shows a clear candidate convergence pattern with D_3 decreasing and D_4 remaining stable. It is interesting to note that most of the change occurs on the first post-debate questionnaire which was the debate with the highest audience ratings.

The LLG graph (7b) shows a self convergent pattern as both of the candidates' perceived positions move closer to the individual's self position. The candidate of choice, however, moves more rapidly than that of the opposing candidate. As a consequence, the difference between the candidates (D_3) increases. Once again, the relative position of the individual remains stable. The exposure pattern accounted for 27 percent of the respondents.

Assimilation/Contrast. The LGG sort category represented the Assimilation/Contrast pattern. In this pattern the candidate of choice moves closer to the self position, the opposing candidate moves away and the perceptions of the two candidates become increasingly polarized. Figure 8 presents the graph of the LGG sort category. (Mean scores are in Table III.) The data set closely matches the expectation for their pattern.

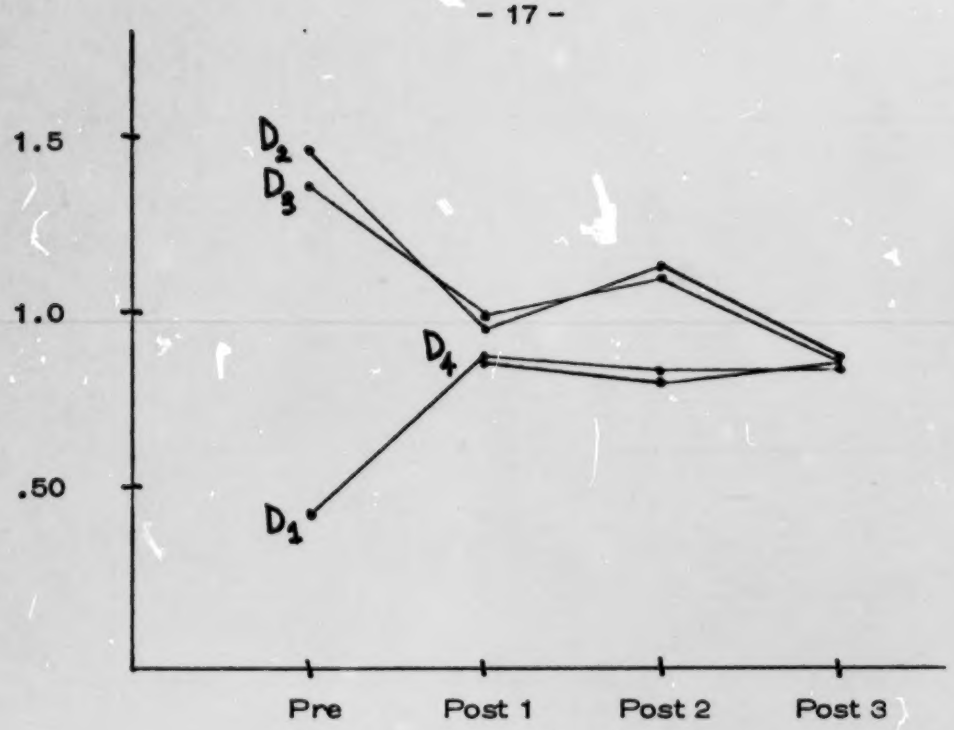

Figure 7 a) Exposure — Candidate Convergent

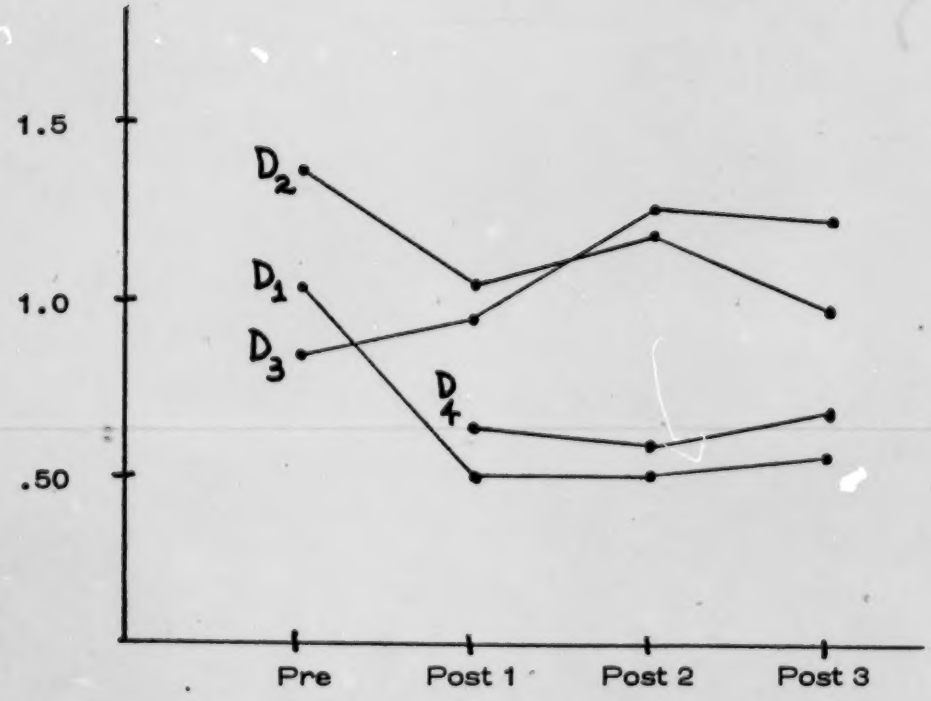

Figure 7 b) Exposure — Self Convergent

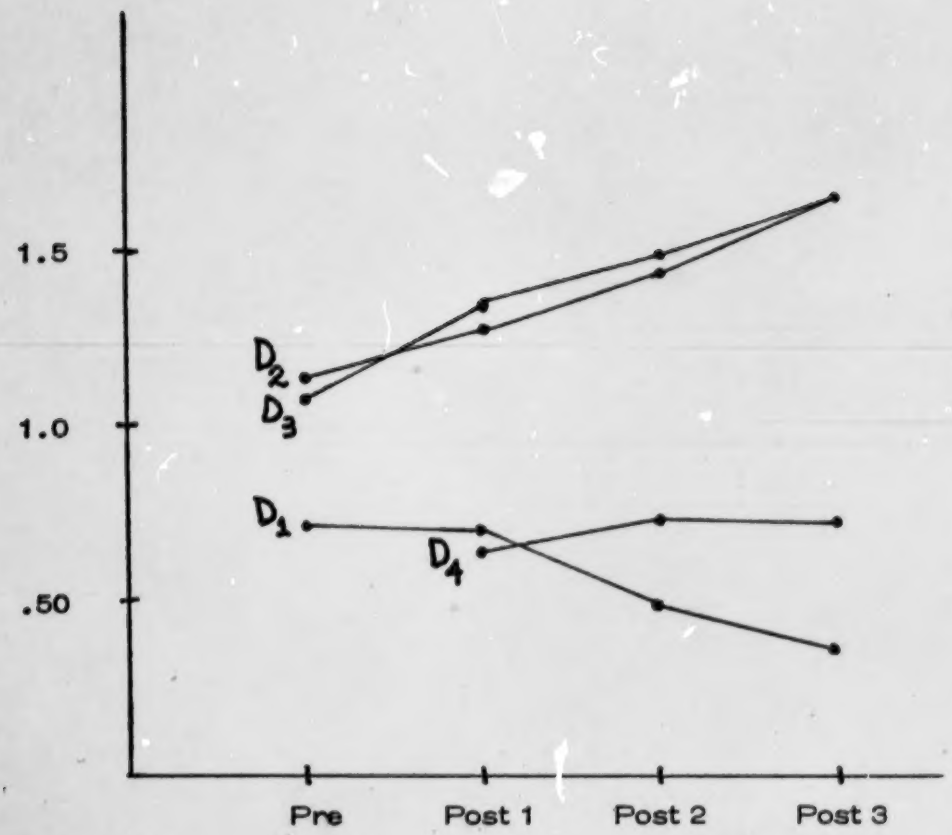

Figure 8 Assimilation/Contrast

The candidate of choice moves steadily closer to the self position and the opposing candidate farther away; D_3 increases and D_4 remains constant. The LGG sort category was the largest category, accounting for 37 percent of the respondents. This percentage for a single sort category would suggest that this pattern is the more common pattern to be found in our analysis of campaign effects.

It is important to note that in all three of these patterns the essential movement occurs in the perception of candidates' position. There is almost no change noted in the individual's position over time. Candidates, therefore, are not persuading voters to their position, but rather it is their position which accommodates the voter. This effect either supports, or is a consequence of, the political folk lore that an issues-oriented candidate will be a defeated candidate.

Family Patterns

Family patterns were investigated by looking at families with two or more members who completed three or more of the questionnaires. In 74 percent of these families, each respondent member declared the same last choice for president. Only six per cent of the families had respondent members who maintained a different choice of candidate. Fifteen per cent of the families had one family member whose initial position varied from the other family members, but whose final position coincided with the common position.[4] Of the three hypothesized patterns, the most common was the congruent and the least common was the independent. The

[4]The remaining five per cent had members who refused to disclose a preference.

relative occurance of the congruent and convergent patterns may well be a function of the point in time of the initial questionnaire. It may well be that had we administered the initial questionnaire immediately after the convention (or even during the primary campaigns), the convergent pattern would have shown higher frequency. Judging from our respondent group, positions on candidates were apparently well established by the time the debates began. Seventy-four per cent of the subjects declared a preference at the outset of our data collection period and maintained that preference. Only 20 per cent used the "escape roil" of "not sure" at any time during the panel study. The question that remains to be answered is: When was that preference established?

Conclusions

From this study, the following conclusions appear warranted:

1) The notion that voters move their positions toward the position of their candidate of choice and that presidential campaigns induce a substantial proportion of the voters to switch candidates was not supported.

2) For most voters, the fall presidential campaigns provide a maintenance or reinforcing function for decisions previously made.

3) On the basis of data derived from the different subject groups, it seems clear that the same campaign can serve to both reduce and increase perceived polarity between candidates. The particular effect which occurs appears to be a function of different maintenance mechanisms used by the respondents.

4) Families showing independent choices among their members are rare. In general, the family provided a firm reference for voting behavior and apparently was forceful in influencing errant members to adopt the common position.

TABLE I

MAINTENANCE PATTERN

Sort Category LLL

Questionnaire	D_1	D_2	D_3	D_4
1	.87	1.39	1.42	.76
2	.70	1.21	1.17	.53
3	.59	1.09	1.08	.55
4	.50	1.08	1.18	.60

Sort Category GGG

Questionnaire	D_1	D_2	D_3	D_4
1	.63	.72	.94	.79
2	.91	1.17	1.48	.70
3	.80	1.30	1.44	.74
4	.86	1.41	1.57	.76

Table I — Mean D scores for sort categories LLL and GGG for the four test administrations

TABLE II

DOUBLE EXPOSURE PATTERN

Sort Category GLL

Questionnaire	D_1	D_2	D_3	D_4
1	.43	1.48	1.37	.68
2	.87	.95	.97	.88
3	.83	1.14	1.12	.81
4	.84	.87	.86	.89

Sort Category LLG

Questionnaire	D_1	D_2	D_3	D_4
1	1.03	1.36	.82	.75
2	.51	1.05	.96	.64
3	.49	1.18	1.25	.58
4	.55	.98	1.21	.68

Table II -- Mean D scores for sort categories GLL and LLG for the four test administrations

TABLE III

ASSIMILATION/CONTRAST PATTERN

Sort Category LGG

Questionnaire	D_1	D_2	D_3	D_4
1	.72	1.14	1.08	.73
2	.70	1.29	1.34	.64
3	.49	1.42	1.49	.72
4	.37	1.65	1.65	.71

Table III — Mean D scores for sort category LGG for the four test administrations

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APPENDIX I

SIXTEEN STATEMENTS USED ON THE FIVE-POINT AGREEMENT SCALES FOR SELF, FORD, AND CARTER

1. In an effort to curb unemployment every effort should be made to create jobs in private industry.

2. Inflation is the number one problem with our economy.

3. The best way to insure economic equality is by strengthening Anti-Trust laws.

4. The wage base for earnings subject to social security tax should be raised.

5. There should be a comprehensive national health insurance system with universal and mandatory coverage.

6. State and federal government should take the burden of welfare off of local government.

7. A full and complete pardon for those in legal trouble because of their opposition to the Vietnam War should be given.

8. There should be federal subsidies and low interest loans to encourage the construction of low and moderate income housing.

9. The best way to assure speedy trial is by increasing the number of judges, prosecutors and public defenders.

10. It is increasingly clear that there is no free, competitive market for crude oil in the United States.

11. United States military forces overseas should be maintained at their present strength.

12. Overall defense spending could and should be cut through better management.

13. There should be a Constitutional Amendment to prevent abortion.

14. Income tax reform is necessary to shift the tax burden from low and middle incomes to higher income brackets.

15. The number of federal bureaucracies should be drastically cut.

16. Better relations with Russia are important for this country.